Context Clues

- Determine the meaning of unknown words by using a variety of context clues including word, sentence and paragraph clues

- Use context clues to determine the meaning of synonyms, antonyms, homophones, homonyms and homographs

- Identify and apply the meaning of the terms synonym, antonym, homophone and homograph

- Recognize the difference between connotation and denotation

What Students Need to Know:

- context clues
    - word
    - sentence
    - paragraph
- synonym
- antonym
- homophone
- homonym
- homograph
- connotation
- denotation

What Students Need to be Able to Do:

- determine (meaning of words; meaning of synonyms, antonyms, homophones, homonyms, homographs)
- use (context clues to determine meaning)
- identify (synonym, antonym, homophone, homograph)
- apply (meaning of synonym, antonym, homophone, homograph)
- recognize (difference between connotation and denotation)

Important Vocabulary

antonym—a word opposite in meaning to another word (e.g., good and bad)

connotation—the attitudes and feelings associated with a word as opposed to a word's literal meaning.

context clue—information a reader may obtain from a text that helps confirm the meaning of a word or group of words

denotation—the literal or "dictionary" meaning of a word.

homograph—a word with the same spelling as another word, whether or not pronounced alike, as *pen* (a writing instrument) vs. *pen* (an enclosure) or *bow* (and arrow) vs. *bow* (of a ship)

homonym—a word with different origin and meaning but the same oral or written form as one or more other words, as *bear* (an animal) vs. *bear* (to support) vs. *bare* (exposed). Homonyms include homophones and homographs.

homophone—a word with different origin and meaning but the same pronunciation as another word, whether or not spelled alike (e.g., hair and hare).

synonym—one of two or more words in a language that have similar meanings (e.g., answer and respond)

CONTEXT CLUES

Perhaps one of the most commonly used phrases by teachers when helping students figure out the meaning of an unknown word is, "Use the context clues." The big question that arises from this practice is whether or not we've ever really taught students how to use the context clues to determine the meaning of an unknown word.

Kylene Beers in her book *When Kids Can't Read* has this to say about the strategy of using context clues: ". . . discerning the meaning of unknown words using context clues requires a sophisticated interaction with the text that dependent readers have not yet achieved." Many times the clues to the meaning are subtle and require the reader to make a lot of inferences. Context clues will often give the reader some idea of the meaning of a word, but they are not sufficient to determine an exact meaning. She goes on to make the following point: "I do think it means we must recognize that using the context as a clue is something that requires lots of practice, something that separates dependent from independent readers, something that is much harder than we may have realized."

Teaching students how to use the context as a clue requires that students see relationships among words and can make inferences about the passage. There are several different types of context clues that are commonly used by authors and warrant our teaching about them to students:

Clues supplied through **synonyms:**
Carly is fond of *trite,* worn-out expressions in her writing. Her favorite is "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

Clues contained in **comparisons and contrasts:**
As the trial continued, the defendant's guilt became more and more obvious. With even the slightest bit of new evidence against him, there would be no chance of *acquittal.*

Clues contained in a **definition or description:**
Paul is a *transcriptionist,* a person who makes a written copy of a recorded message.

Clues through **association** with other words in the sentence:
Brian is considered the most troublesome student ever to have walked the halls of Central High School. He has not passed a single class in his four years there and seldom makes it through an entire hour of class without falling asleep or getting sent to the office. His teachers consider him completely *incorrigible.*

Clues which appear in a **series:**
The *dulcimer,* fiddle, and banjo are all popular among the Appalachian Mountain people.

Clues provided by the **tone and setting:**
The streets filled instantly with *bellicose* protesters, who pushed and shoved their way through the frantic bystanders. The scene was no longer peaceful and calm as the marchers had promised it would be.

Clues derived from **cause and effect:**
Since no one came to the first voluntary work session, attendance for the second one is *mandatory* for all the members.
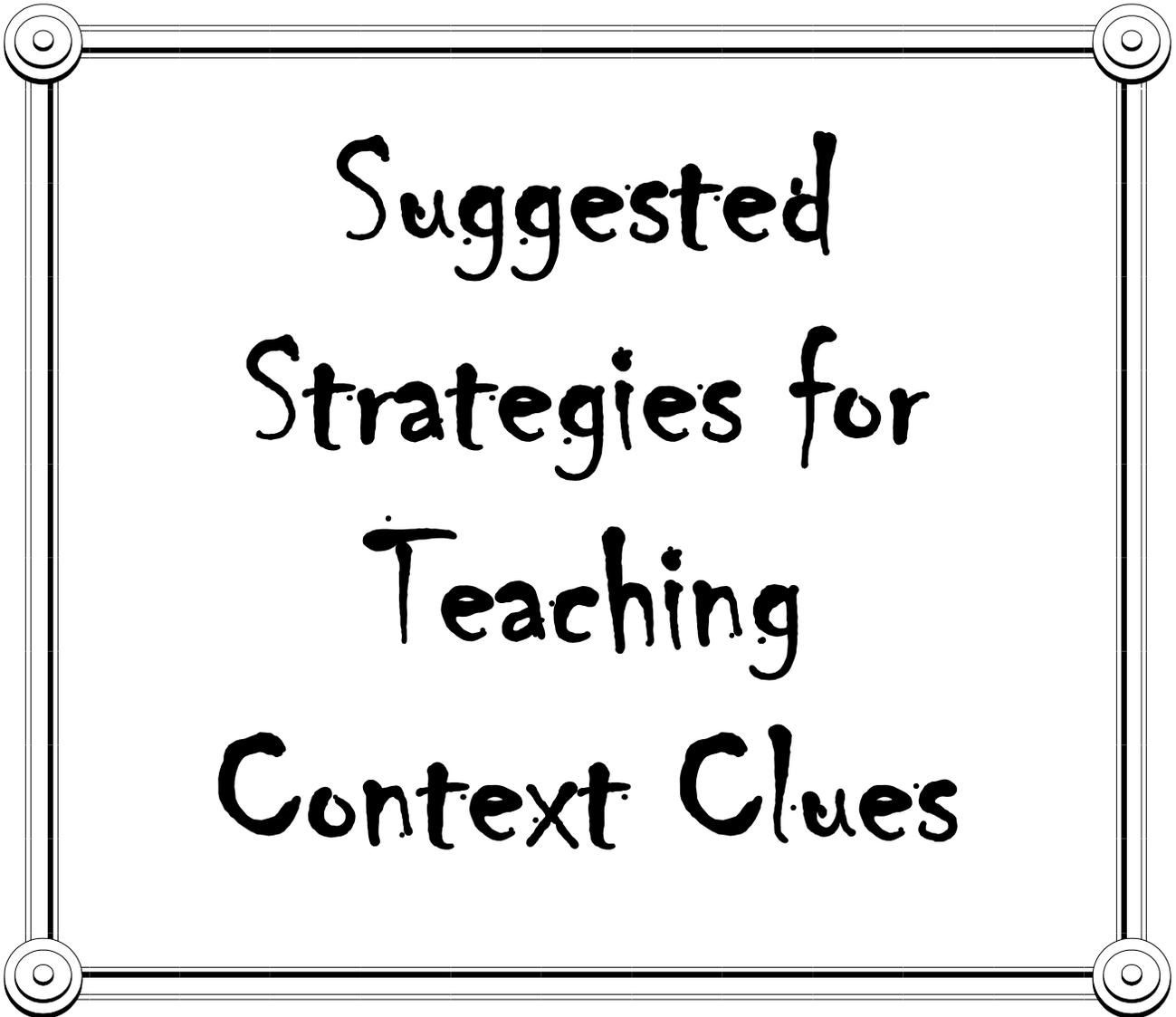

MINI-LESSONS FOR TEACHING CONTEXT CLUES

Working out what words mean
- Look at how a new word is used
- Look at the other words in the sentence
- Look at the sentences before and after the new words

QUESTIONS FROM PAST TESTS

"Rachel scowled in disgust as she walked to the school bus stop. The sidewalk was littered with newspapers and candy wrappers. The front door to Lee's Grocery was covered with ugly graffiti."

What is an antonym for scowled?

a. joked
b. snarled
c. grinned
d. fussed

"Hmph," he said as the girl passed by. She's probably another troublemaker, he thought.
To confirm his suspicion, the girl stepped back to kick a piece of garbage into the street."

What is a synonym for the word confirm?

a. notice
b. prove
c. raise
d. undo

"The water feels good. It is warm at the top, but cooler down around your toes."

Which word pair is an example of antonyms?

a. warm and cooler
b. b. good and cooler
c. toes and down
d. warm and around

"It flaps its sleeves
when mother runs to the coop
to check if the hens have laid."

According to the poem, what is a coop?

a. a place to keep tools
b. a place to keep chickens
c. a place to feed horses
d. a place to observe stars

"I wanted to be very scientific about discovering her favorite name, so I decided to do a research experiment."

Which word is a synonym for experiment?

a. test
b. data
c. control
d. hypothesis

"She was eager tot ravel into space, but she had to wait her turn."

Which word is a synonym for eager?

a. excited
b. scared
c. curious
d. proud

Suggested Strategies for Teaching Context Clues

CLOZE ACTIVITIES

Cloze passages encourage students to use context to figure out unknown words. The procedure is easy to carry out. A short passage of text is selected and copied or summarized on the board or a transparency. Several words are deleted, and students are guided to figure out the missing words by using the sense of the surrounding sentences.

Marty's mom walked over to the _____ of the pine tree. She undid the wire that keeps the fence _____, so she could get in. She crouched _____ in the pine _____, and Shiloh started to _____ up on her with his front paws. He licked at her _____.

Students who have difficulty with this may be given banks of words from which to choose their answers; including three words in each bank usually works well.

Marty's mom walked over to the _____ of the pine tree. (tree, trunk, top)

When an aim of the cloze activity is to help students learn to cross-check their use of context with letter-sound clues, the beginning part of each omitted word can be provided. This limits students' answer possibilities to words that fit the meaning of the sentence and begin with the appropriate letter-sound.

Marty's mom walked over to the tr_____ of the pine tree. She undid the wire that keeps the fence cl_____, so she could get in. She crouched d_____ in the pine n_____, and Shiloh started to l_____ up on her with his front paws. He licked at her f_____.

Another variation might involve placing a sticky note on top of each blank. Students can then predict what words might work in the sentence. Then take off part of the sticky note to reveal the beginning letter and have students refine their predictions based on the first letter.

Other ways to use cloze include:

- Read a sentence to students, replacing one of the words with the word "beep." Students try to determine what word should be used in place of the "beep." Discuss how students were able to determine the missing word.

- Write a sentence on an overhead and tape a piece of tagboard on top of one of the words. Students should read the sentence and try to determine the missing word. Have them write down the word that they think should be used in the sentence. Then flip up the tagboard to expose the missing word. Discuss why various answers might or might not be feasible in terms of semantic (meaning) and syntactic (sound right) clues in the sentence.

- A variation of the activity above could involve covering the word with 2 pieces of tagboard — one over the first letter, and the other covering the rest of the word. When students have made their prediction about the missing word, uncover the beginning letter. Students then evaluate their prediction in terms of the first letter of the word.

DEVELOP VOCABULARY

Points to Remember for Developing Vocabulary

- Talk about words — interesting words, unusual words, new words, or old words with new meanings

- Teach in context whenever possible

- Teach students how to use context to figure out new words

- Focus on just a few words at a time. It is better to learn three words well than to learn ten words superficially

- Promote words. Maintain a wall chart with the three or four most interesting words students have read or heard this week

- Think in terms of phrases and sentences and interesting sayings

- Use literature as a model of how words can be used. Good authors are masters at choosing just the right word

- Promote variety and versatility. Talk about how even a simple word can have many shades of meaning: for example, *hit* the ball, a *hit* show, *hit* the nail on the head, *hit* and run, *hit* the deck, and so on.

- Compliment students when they use interesting language

- Encourage students to use the context to predict the meaning of unknown words. Have them record unknown words on the chart on the following page, then ask them to predict a word's meaning. Finally, have them check their prediction by looking up the word in a dictionary. The definition or synonym goes in the third column.

FIND THE KEY WORDS

Teach students to look for key words as they are reading. These are the words that will help them determine the meaning of unknown words. Highlighting or underlining the key words will help them use this information to determine meanings of unknown words.

VOCABULARY CHECK

New Word	I Think it Means	Definition or Synonym

SURVIVAL WORDS

- Select several words from a text that may cause students trouble. These should be words that students are likely to encounter again as they are reading.
- Have students create a chart like the one on the next page.
- Students should copy the words in the first column of the chart and check the appropriate column indicating their familiarity with the word — not familiar, somewhat familiar, I think I know
- Ask students to write the meanings of as many of the words as they know in the "Meaning" column
- Have students read the selection, looking for the words on the chart. When they find a word, they should record the page on which it is found and confirm their predicted meaning from the context
- After students have rated their word knowledge, written their meanings, and read the text, break them into groups and ask them to share with each other the meanings they are most confident about
- Finally, discuss the words with the whole group, answering questions and clarifying thinking.

SEMANTIC MAPPING

Using Semantic Mapping before and after reading will expand a reader's word knowledge . It will also help the reader to see the relationships and interrelationships of words. It will help students build bridges from the known to the new.

Procedure:
1. Select a word important to the story
2. Write it down
3. Think of related words and list them in categories
4. Name the categories
5. Discuss the words and their relationships
6. Read the story
7. Return to the semantic map. Add new words and discuss the relationships

Evaluation:
- Are you able to use the vocabulary (word knowledge) to understand the passage?
- Can you develop a meaningful paragraph using the instructional words and related word?

Additional Suggestion:
- Use semantic mapping as a vehicle to introduce or summarize a chapter or a thematic unit

SURVIVAL WORDS

Word	Page	Not Familiar	Somewhat Familiar	I Think I Know	Meaning

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

When supporting developing or struggling readers, it is important to help them remember that although we pay attention to the way a word looks when we read, we also must pay attention to how it is used in a sentence.

Help students analyze new vocabulary by having them complete a graphic organizer that requires analyzing how a word is used in context. A blank is found on the next page.

HUMAN CONTEXT CLUES

Play this game to help students learn which words are helpful in determining the meaning of an unknown word.
1. Select a sentence with an unknown word.
2. Write each word in the sentence on a separate index card.
3. Hand each index card to a student and share with those students the sentence.
4. Have the students arrange themselves so the sentence can be read from left to right.
5. The student with the unknown word turns his card around so the other students can see it. The words on the other cards should not be revealed.
6. Arbitrarily ask one student at a time to reveal his card. Discuss whether or not each word helps students determine the meaning of the unknown word.
7. Continue until all words have been revealed.

USE THE CONTEXT CLUES

What does it mean?

A reptile with a shell on its back; warm-blooded

Another word with a similar meaning

turtle

tortoise

Where we've seen or heard the word

"The Tortoise and the Hare"

It is a _____

___ Noun—person, place or thing
___ Verb—action word
____ Adjective—describing noun
____ Adverb—describing verb

USE THE CONTEXT CLUES

What does it mean?

Another word with a similar meaning
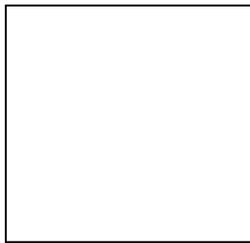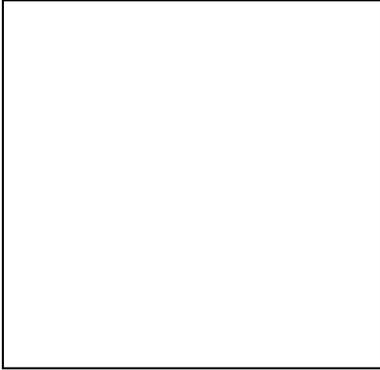
Where we've seen or heard the word

It is a _____

MULTIPLE MEANING WORDS

Words that have more than one meaning often present problems for students. These words usually don't present any problems as far as decoding goes. They are words that are often familiar in a student's oral language if they are native English speakers. However, for second-language learners, these words require many exposures in meaningful text before students feel as if they understand all of the different meanings.

To call students' attention to these words, follow these steps:
1. Select three to five words to be taught in one lesson.
2. Present the words on the board or overhead. Give the students the same words on cards.
3. Use one of the words in a written sentence and ask the students to provide a meaning for the words. For example: (A) My mother asked me to *set* the table before dinner.
4. After the students have agreed on a definition, present the same word in a new sentence. For example: (B) Jamie was always 10 minutes late for school, so his mother _____ the clock ahead 10 minutes.
5. Ask students to hold up the word card that shows the word that best fits into the second sentence.
6. Discuss how *set* is also the correct answer in sentence B. What definition can you give for *set* in sentence B? How is the meaning different for the word *set* in the two sentences?
7. Ask the students if they can think of another definition for *set* or how they have heard people use the word in a different way. They may suggest *set*, as in "set the book on the table," or *set*, as in "ready, set, go."
8. Repeat the steps for the other words for the lesson.

The following chart lists some common multiple meaning words.

about	run	spell	can
will	down	mean	right
page	letter	head	saw
state	hard	above	band
back	set	well	have
head	bank	high	on
by	use	book	face
miss	side	light	last
point	left	take	off
over	home	get	cut

WHEN TO USE CONTEXT CLUES AND WHEN NOT TO USE CONTEXT CLUES

Context alone cannot substitute for direct vocabulary instruction. Some words will need to be taught before readers can comprehend a text. Some researchers found that students who read grade-level texts under natural conditions have about a one in twenty chance of learning meaning from context. Others agree that learning words through context clues is limited at best. They offer several cautions about word learning through context:

- Context clues are a relatively ineffective means for inferring the meaning of specific words.
- Students are more apt to learn specific new vocabulary when definitional information is combined with contextual clues than when contextual analysis is used in isolation.
- Research on teaching contextual analysis as a transferable and generalizable strategy for word learning is promising, but limited.

When determining which words should be directly taught, a four-step process may prove helpful:

1. Determine what you want your students to learn from the reading of the content; in other words, the theme of the unit of study.
2. Identify key terms that are related to the unit's theme.
3. Decide on appropriate strategies to introduce and reinforce the words (e.g., a graphic organizer)
4. Identify the general words that are not necessarily central to the theme of the unit, but that lend themselves to various word-learning strategies that promote independence (e.g., modeling words in context)

Another way to help you decide which words to teach is to ask the following questions:

- Is understanding the word important to understanding the selection in which it appears?
    - If no, then you select other words that are more important.
- Are students able to use context or structural analysis skills to discover the word's meaning?
    - If yes, allow them to practice them.
- Can working with this word be useful in furthering students' context, structural analysis, or dictionary skills?
    - If yes, then focus on that
- How useful is this word outside of the reading selection being currently taught?
    - The more frequent a word is, the greater the chances that students will retain the word once you teach it.

USING CLUES TO FIGURE OUT MEANINGS OF WORDS

Sometimes readers can figure out word meanings from the context or from their prior knowledge of a concept. Below are some strategies students can use to figure out the meaning of a word by using context clues. These should be taught to students..

- Reread the sentence. Look for ideas and words that offer meaning clues
- Read the sentence without the word
    - Can you figure out what word you know that would make sense in place of the unknown word?
- Look at the word in relation to the sentence and full paragraph.
    - Can you figure out a meaning?
- Read the two or three sentences that came before the one that contains the unfamiliar word(s). Look for meaning clues (i.e., synonyms or antonyms).
- Read the two or three sentences that come after the one that contains the unfamiliar word(s). Look for meaning clues (i.e., synonyms or antonyms).
- Look at the page where the word is located
    - Is there an illustration or diagram that helps with the meaning of the word
- Find the base or root word and think of its meaning.
- See if the prefix can help you understand the word.
- Ask yourself: Have I seen or heard this word in another text or situation? What do I recall?
- Think of the overall meaning of the selection you are reading. Does your understanding of the whole help you figure out particular words?
- Ask a classmate if he/she knows the meaning of the word
- Look the word up in a dictionary